

S.14 - An act relating to a report on criminal justice-related investments and trends
Community Justice Testimony
House Judiciary Committee
Jill Evans, Director, Essex Community Justice Center
April 6, 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to come back and testify on S.14. My name is Jill Evans. I am the Director of the Essex Community Justice Center. I am testifying on behalf of the 17 Community Justice Centers in Vermont.

Since the last hearing, we have had time to consider S.14 as introduced, as well as proposed amendments. We continue to be in support of bill as an important effort to advance and measure the aims of the Justice Reinvestment Initiative.

The significant benefit of this bill as it relates to the CJs is the transparency it will create through required reporting that will measure outcomes, and also the additional transparency over the current process for community-based supports, like CJs, receiving justice reinvestment funds. Although the DOC has committed to a Justice Reinvestment line item, putting this language into statute will ensure that this commitment remains if leadership and administrations change.

The required reporting will make more visible in the Statehouse the important work of the Community Justice Centers. The CJs support the goals set forth in Justice Reinvestment I - to build a smarter justice system that reduces our reliance on incarceration. The CJs and restorative justice have played an important role in justice reform, even pre-dating JRI. CJs are a community-based resource, exactly like those that JRI is designed to support.

I would like to, once again, provide you with some information about CJC funding because our hope is that S.14 may be able to help stabilize sustainable funding for the CJs. CJs never know how much funding we are going to get each year from the Department of Corrections through grants to each CJC, and up until last year, we had never received a COLA increase.

Once Justice Reinvestment came upon us, it has been used to provide us with funding. In the FY 2023 budget, the Community Justice Centers received \$317,030 in Justice Reinvestment appropriations as a result of out-of-bed savings in the Department of Corrections budget:

- FY 2023 Budget - \$317,030 Breakdown
 - Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) -- \$204,450
 - Orange and Addison County CJC Parity -- \$20,000
 - Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training - \$85,000 - \$5,000 to each CJC

- FY 2023 Budget Adjustment - \$342,247 - We believed the legislative intent was to distribute equal grants to the 17 CJs of just over \$20,000 each in FY23, but have yet to hear any official confirmation from DOC, and have heard that DOC may instead use those funds to support a COLA increase in FY24 .

All this to say – it is not fiscally responsible to operate in this way and the strain of being able to budget with assurance has ripple effects through the workforce. With all the justice reform efforts of the past several years, we have welcomed the task of playing a significant role in the criminal justice system, but we are the only component of the criminal justice system that doesn't have a steady, consistent, and base funding source.

We are hoping that, possibly through S.14, things may be able to start to change. Unfortunately, as of now, our understanding is that all of the funding in S.14 will be one-time. While we can use any and all funding – one-time or base – we really need funds that are dedicated, year after year, to restorative justice programming.

We urge the General Assembly to maintain its commitment to funding community-based services which achieve the aims of JRI and determining a sustainable and improved process moving forward for allocating these investments. We are hopeful that S.14 will help achieve this.